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NEHEMIAH 9:5-38

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

Let's come before the Lord.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we recognize that prayer is a way that we talk to you and acknowledge that you're working. Just a pause that we take is one that just reminds us of all the things you've done for us and the things we can come and ask you about. Lord, we want to fit into your plans. So we come before you now and ask that you teach us what that means and what it looks like. We also know that prayer is an opportunity for us to listen to you and what you might say to us, and that sometimes we pause in prayer that we can hear you give us direction or point out something in our lives that we need to work on. Lord, thank you for giving us prayer as a channel to tune you into our lives more. We ask that you would encourage us in our lives to take more time to pray. We look forward to what you're going to do as you center our hearts on you more. In Jesus' name, amen.

Today we're going to look at the longest prayer in the Bible in Nehemiah 9. Now I thought well that's interesting, the longest prayer in the Bible. Do you know what the shortest prayer in the Bible is? Well the shortest prayer in the Bible is found in Matthew when Peter saw Jesus out on the water and he says, "Lord, let me come out on the water with you." So he gets out, steps out of the boat, and he starts walking toward Jesus. But then got distracted by the waves and things going on and starts to sink. And his prayer was: "*Lord, save me!*" Now I think that's a good prayer for any of us. That's the shortest prayer in the Bible. It's a good prayer for all of us to pray. Lord, save me. Today we're going to look at the longest prayer. It's in Nehemiah 9.

Now you receive from me an email each week that prepares you for the sermon and what's going on. This week I sent out an email with a question. The question had to do with forgiveness. What do you say to someone who says, "My sins are too great or I've sinned too much to be forgiven by God." It's a thought that I'm trying to entertain in your own mind as you think about preparing yourself for today's message. But then some people respond. I do appreciate the responses that I get from you and they're helpful for me as the Lord is working in my own heart in that passage and trying to understand what's happening. Today in our passage we're going to see the answer to that question because we're going to get this bigger picture of God.

Now in this long prayer from verse 5-38, we have all of it focused on the Lord and it's directed to Him. But I want to read to you and read together with you the passage at its end point starting in verse 32. This is like the conclusion of the prayer. I want you to understand the conclusion first before we go back and look at the prayer in detail. So if you would stand with me, please, in honor of God's word. I want to read the conclusion to this prayer starting in verse 32.

They say – *Now therefore* (that’s how we know it’s the conclusion because of the *therefore*), *our God, the great God*. The first of the prayer is going to be on how big God’s greatness is – this is kind of a summary, the great God. The word *great* is kind of important here. *Mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love* (we’ll talk more about what that looks like), *do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes* (that is they’re coming back from captivity; they’re still oppressed by kings and so on)—*the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.*

But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it. In other words what they’re saying is: Lord, we recognize that we haven’t been close to you. We are going to make a binding agreement. We are dedicating ourselves to you today. Regularly at the end of our service I pray, “Lord, we just ask that we want to dedicate ourselves to you for this week.” It’s the same prayer that they’re praying in this passage. We want to dedicate ourselves. We’re writing it down, affixing our seals, we’re dedicating ourselves to you. That’s how this prayer ends.

You may be seated.

When I started working on this prayer this week, I took the whole passage (these are my notes as I was working) from verse 5 all the way down to verse 38 and I just put it on a piece of paper and I just started reading it. What is important in this passage? I realized there was a lot of things that God does. So the black lines and circles around things, those are God’s actions, all the verbs associated with what God does in the passage. I found that interesting. But then I got to these red... All the red there underlined are all the things the Israelites had done that are bad. In other words God did these good things and these people did bad things. There’s just this real contrast in the passage between them. And then I noticed all of these circled words. These are the conjunctions. The *but*, the *so*, the *now* that are there and they draw contrast between them.

So what I’m going to do today is I’m going to read through this prayer and as I do I’m going to draw attention to two lists. The list of how big God is (growing attention to the things He’s done) and then another list about the failures of the people. As we see the failures of the people contrasted with the greatness of God and all that He’s done and His faithfulness, it does something to my heart. It makes me so grateful that I can continue to come to God even if I’ve sinned. I would suggest that anyone who feels like they can’t come to God because their sins are

too big or they've sinned too much would benefit from reading this passage because they'll see all of the grandeur of God and how big He is. He's much bigger than we imagine.

So let's go back now. I'm going to take you back to our text which is done a little bit differently and I'm going to take you back and forth between the prayer and the lists.

Here we are in verse 5. *Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise.* So this is a prayer starts out with praise, acknowledging who God is and it says – *You alone are the Lord.* That's the name Yahweh. You alone are Yahweh. In other words there's no other gods before me. That's right in the Ten Commandments. There's no other gods. You alone are God, are Lord.

And then he goes into just looking at the heavens, just looking at creation, and to see how great God is in creation. *You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.* So the first act in this prayer is to look at God's greatness demonstrated in His creation. The Bible tells us that everyone, whether they have exposure to God's word or not can see the presence of God because He is a creator. We can see God because He's created the world and we start imagining all the amazing things God does.

I'm really interested and amazed at how much doctors know. But I'm also amazed at how much they don't know. They're just trying their ideas and the latest ideas they saw here and there. And that's good. I need those ideas because I don't have them. So I appreciate doctors, but it's always amazing to me the human body and how it operates and how much bigger it is than even doctors can figure out sometimes. God created our world, He created the stars, He created those mountains. God is big. So we're getting this picture of God being very big just looking at creation. So we start out in our list (here's our "God is big" list that we're going through), the first one is God is great. He's greater than we can imagine.

Let's go back to the prayer. He says in verse 7 – *You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous. You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.*

So now we have this great immense God who created the whole world and He's chosen to make a promise to people. So we have a God who is the creator God who has made Himself known and He's made promises to us. And some of His covenants and promises are conditional. That is, if you do this you'll be blessed. But the commitment He made to Abraham was unconditional. The commitment He makes to us is unconditional in His love for us. And that's why it says in verse 8 – *You have kept your promise because you are righteous.* Not because somebody did anything else. So God is not just a God of the universe who created everything, but God is a personal God who makes a promise with us. God keeps His covenant promise to us.

We go on. It says – *You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself (in other words you created a reputation), which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters.* So they would always remember the name of God. It's with the name of God, His name Yahweh, that so many things took place. God loved them in a very careful way, very compassionate way.

So another amazing thing about God in our list is that God has developed His reputation of faithfulness. That God is this big God who's so great. He's a God of promises to us and He's a faithful God who took care of them all throughout their wilderness wanderings.

Let's continue in the God list. Here in verse 12 it says – *By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.* There's this personal nature of God that He cares about guiding them and protecting them.

You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses.

Now this is a real interesting idea here because some people I think look at the law of God or they look at the principles in God's word and they see them as a list of rules and it gives them this feeling of obligation. I think it is important for us to be obliged to serve the Lord. So obligation isn't bad. But we have to realize that God, this creator of the whole world, also provided with us guidelines and instructions about how to live and what to do.

You should not yell at your wife. Now you might say, "Oh but it makes me feel so much better when I yell at her." Well it might make you feel good to do something, but that's not how we measure whether it's good or not. In the short run it might make you feel better, but it damages relationships. God has designed the world. He's designed our hearts and emotions and relationships. He's given us instructions and guidance about how to respond in those situations.

Do not have sex before you get married. "Oh but I'm committed to this person. I feel like this is okay for us." And what ends up happening is we have all kinds of problems in marriage relationships today because people don't abide by the principles that God has laid out for us. These principles are right and just and good. They're God's success principles that He's laid out for us.

Children, honor your father and mother. Somebody might say, "I can't honor my father. I don't like him. I don't like what he does. He's not a good person." The Bible doesn't say only honor your parents that are good. It says honor your father and mother. Why? Because it does something inside of you. It makes you an honoring person. You will find people in life you don't like, but we still honor people. Even people we don't respect, we honor them because that does something inside of us. We honor.

God has laid out these success principles for us. They are good. They are just. They are right. So on the list we see that God is personal and He communicates to us. So now God is just this internal creator, but He's a God that makes promises. He's faithful and He communicates to us.

In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them. God is compassionate and He cares about our food and water, about taking care of us. We're getting this picture of God now in this prayer that's impressing on us something very important about who God is.

But now we come to the *but*. This is the first one. We've got to go to the other list. Verse 16 says – *But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands.* Do you know what stiff-necked is, young people? Stiff-necked is when you're resistant. Mom says do something, you go, "No, I'm not going to do it." Your neck is stiff. Okay? If you're being resistant you have a stiff neck. That's what they were doing *and they did not obey your commands*, it says.

They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. So in our failures of man, our first item that we put here, they are arrogant, stiff-necked, did not obey. They refused to listen. They failed to remember. They were rebellious.

So what's God's response? The *but* is taking us to another list. *But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.* I think that's the key verse in the whole prayer. I think it's the verse we come away with recognizing God and who He is. Because it draws attention to God's forgiving nature that He's compassionate, He's slow to anger, and abounding in love.

Now the word *love* there is the word *chesed*. It's a very important Hebrew word. *Chesed* is a depth of love. It's the kind of love that has to do with commitment, not necessarily feeling. It has to do with this commitment. It's the love that says I'm going to hang in there with you because I have made a covenant with you. So that's what God is doing in this *chesed*, abounding in love.

Therefore you did not desert them. In verse 17 and 18 God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love. We are getting a picture here of His enduring relationship with us. He's made a promise to us. Now as we're working with Him and even when we're doing the wrong thing then He hangs in there with us. It's an enduring love that He has.

Even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, "This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt," or when they committed awful blasphemies. Now we're getting to the worst sins that they could commit. These are bad sins. In fact we go back to our failures of man. They committed blasphemy.

Notice the response of God in the midst of the sin of the people. *Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You*

gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

This was right after the response of this blasphemy, this terrible sin. Here's how God continued to care for them. *You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their children as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their parents to enter and possess. Their children went in and took possession of the land.*

Notice what happens when they come in and take possession of the land. *You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you gave the Canaanites into their hands, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities (they didn't have to build them, they captured them. They had cities that were already fortified when they went in there) and fertile land (it was ready for the crops to be planted and grow); they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things (the houses were already furnished when they went into them), wells already dug (the plumbing was already there, so they didn't have to dig the wells), there were vineyards ready with grapes on them, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.*

The goodness of God is so vast and so big that right after the verse where they had sinned in the worst way in blasphemy it talks about God caring for them and being good to them. So we see that there in verses 19-25. God is good.

But... we're back to the people again. But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. They were disobedient, rebelled, and turned their backs. So (back to God again) you delivered them into the hands of their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. So even in the midst of their bad stuff their doing, God comes along in verse 27 and disciplines them. He's trying to help them see there are ways to live that are right. You've got to do the right thing.

But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Wow. This is amazing that God is so faithful because it says there in verse 28 they did evil, but then look at what God does. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.

Not once. Time after time. Never come to a place where you believe that you can't be forgiven because you've sinned too many times. If you believe that, you just haven't read the Bible. God is showing us here how forgiving and compassionate and faithful God is to us.

You warned them in order to turn them back to your law (God delivers them time after time and He warned them), but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, of which you said, “The person who obeys them will live by them.” Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you gave them into the hands of the neighboring peoples.

So in this passage we have both the fact that they were arrogant, disobedient, stiff-necked, refused to listen, sinned, paid no attention. And we have God’s response in this verse also. It says – *For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you warned them.* And so on the God list we can see here that God delivers them time after time and warned them. God warns them and was patient in verse 30.

And then in verse 31 – *But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.* Mercy is used twice there. God is merciful even when we do the wrong thing. So it says there God is gracious and merciful. God is merciful in verse 31. There is a list of a lot of things about God.

I was talking to Jack before the service and he says, “Hey, in response to your question that you shared this week, I was going to respond but I didn’t. I think that anybody who says that about not being forgiven must not know how big God is, must not know how big God’s grace is.” It’s powerful.

So now we come back to verse 32 to the conclusion of the prayer and now it makes more sense as they’re dedicating themselves to the Lord here. Let me read it. *Now therefore, our God, the great God (you should underline the word great), mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love (underline the word love there), do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.* God lavished His care on them.

But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

So they come to this place in the prayer where they say we’re going to commit, write it down. We’re going to dedicate ourselves to you. Wow. There is so much right here in our own lives to recognize that God has forgiven us time after time, over and over again. He is compassionate, He is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in *chesed* kind of love. It’s just a really powerful thing that when we understand how big God is then we appreciate the fact that He’s forgiven us of our sins.

I think that the person who has the perception that their sins are so bad that no one can forgive them must be measuring their approval before God in a different way than God outlines it. There are some who come and if you ask them, “Are you going to go to heaven?” they’ll say, “Well, I’ve done good. In fact there’s more good in my life than bad, therefore God owes me this,” or something like that. But that’s not what it’s like. There is this threshold that one sin in our lives condemns us. There’s nothing we can do before God. All of the things that we have before God are because of His grace and His mercy.

One of the people that responded to my email this week was Ginny and I asked her if I could read this. So this is Ginny’s response. I just love this. It just struck me as I was doing my own study.

She says: “I never had a relationship with Jesus before I was close to fifty years old. I never knew it was even possible. No one ever told me that. I started to listen to Christian radio by accident and one night heard that Jesus was God’s sacrifice for me because there had to be a shedding of blood for the payment of my sin. Hence Jesus, the Lamb of God. All of a sudden the light went on and I understood that I was going to hell without Jesus doing that. No question. That the only reason I was going to go to heaven and live with God is Jesus dying on the cross. Before that moment I couldn’t figure out why He had to die and why that could mean my sins were gone. I always just figured I was going to heaven. Never knew I wasn’t on the way there. Before that I was just trying to be a good person and hoping that I could be good enough to go there, although I had no idea in my mind what the threshold was. I didn’t know how holy God is, how great He is, how loving He is, how trustworthy He is. I had never read anything in the Bible. I was lost and never knew it. I remember praying sometimes with my son because he was afraid at bedtime, so I would tell him how God was watching over him. But it was never with conviction or authority because in my heart and mind I was really thinking, ‘I don’t know how this is possible, but my son believes it.’”

The words she uses here are the same ones that the passage uses (which is interesting) that how great He is and how loving He is.

If we were to take this whole idea that’s in this passage, in this prayer in Nehemiah 9, we were to compress it down to one verse, it would be this verse that we are memorizing this month in 1 John 3:1 – *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!* I just think that is a verse all of us should be memorizing. Not just kids, everybody should memorize this.

It’s the compressed version of Nehemiah 9. *How great is the love.* That word *love* is a New Testament word. The Old Testament word we’re talking about is this word *chesed*, but in the New Testament the word is *agapé* which is the deepest kind of love, a commitment kind of love. That’s the word used here. *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!*

As you walk out of here today I trust that God will do something special in your heart. You can stand tall. You don’t have to be hunched over like, “Oh I’m such a sinful wretch.” You can stand tall because God’s love has been lavished on you and you experience this forgiveness and you

want to tell other people there's no reason to feel unworthy before God because God has made you worthy by the death of Jesus Christ. God has made you worthy because you can accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and your Savior. It is now that we do that and we receive this amazing love that God has lavished on us and we are children of God which causes us to say, "I'm going to write this down, I'm going to fix my name to it everybody can document this. I'm dedicating myself to Jesus. I'm dedicating myself to God." We do that not out of obligation, we do that out of such gratefulness of what He's done for us. We recognize that following with all of our hearts is what allows us to experience the tremendous grace that He has for each one of us. Amen? Amen.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we are overwhelmed by your greatness. We recognize that you're personal and you've communicated to us and you've shared this truth. Lord, we mess up. So I ask that you forgive us. Help us to receive your forgiveness deep within our souls. Teach us what it means to forgive ourselves based on your forgiveness of us as well. And use, Lord, the deep weakness that we have as strength in your hand. We want to honor you, we want to dedicate ourselves to you, we want to give ourselves to you today. In Jesus' name, amen.